

Interview with George W. Wright, Jr., afc2016037_0940

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Interviewed by Sarah Bryan at Wright Funeral Home in Oxford (Granville County), North Carolina

Sarah Bryan: Okay, we're recording now. Let me ask you just for the recording to introduce yourself and tell me where we are, please.

George Wright: I'm George W. Wright, Jr., funeral director, and we're in Oxford, North Carolina.

SB: Great. Well, as I mentioned, I hope I can ask you to review a lot of what you've just told me, because it really gets to the heart of a lot of what I was hoping to ask you about. But could I ask you first to talk about yourself, you know, your [coughs] excuse me, your coming to this field, your background?

GW: Ah, well, I had an uncle and aunt who were in the funeral service. [Coughs] And they had needed some, they needed help and asked me if I would be interested. And I told them I didn't know, I'd try it. And after about six months I found that I really loved the interaction with people. Didn't like the funeral business, per se, didn't like death, but I truly enjoyed my reactions with the families. I really enjoyed that. I saw that a lot of good could be done if you did it with the right intentions.

SB: Around what year was this, that you began?

GW: Ah, right out of high school. 1958.

SB: And did you grow up here?

GW: Yes. Granville County is my home. Born in Franklin County, but been here since I was five. Yeah. Country boy. Raised on the farm.

[GW's phone rings, pause in recording while he answers.]

SB: Let me ask what your uncle and aunt's names were.

GW: Allen. [Anetha?] Allen and Waverly D. Allen. The Allen Funeral Home.

SB: What was that initial learning process like for you? Both learning the technical skills, and the interpersonal—

GW: Well, the technical skills, the apprenticeship, it went so-so. Wasn't as — wasn't as much learning as I had hoped for. In fact, I guess I taught myself more after school than I really learned in school. I wanted to be good at my profession so I found ways to do things a little better than the text book. In fact, my wife told me I ought to write a text book; I thought, "Well, I know things I don't want other folks to know!" [Laughs] But it's been an interesting — ooh, how many? Fifty-six years. Wow.

SB: And where did you receive your formal education and training?

GW: American Academy in New York. American Academy. Which was a — they had a good reputation of turning out quality students. And they did. [Laughs] I'm quite proud of the education I got there. However, I had to keep learning. You I know, you're never good enough. I don't care how good you are, you can always learn something. And in fact I'm still trying. There's got to be a way I can do it a little bit better. My families are very pleased with our services, and that's pleasing. [Coughs] Yeah. Very pleasing, when a family tells you, "Thank you. You made it easier to bear." Or, "Mama was so lovely, I couldn't even cry." It's just, that's the reward. That's the reward.

SB: Your wife was telling me before you came in how extremely skilled you are at this kind of work.

GW: Yes.

SB: What makes a person good at this? What are the qualities and knowledge that you need?

GW: Like any profession, you want to do good. You know, regardless of what it is, you should be the best at it. No one should be better than you at your profession. That doesn't mean that you are the best, but no one should be better. You know, you should always try to get better, and if you're not Number One, you ought to, they ought to hear your footsteps. Number One ought to hear you coming. "Aw, is that George again? He's still coming!" [Laughs]

[0:05:00] And that's it. Just get better. And don't never think you're the best. You know? As good as you may be. And I'm darn good. But I know there's someone better. But he hears my footsteps. Here I come! Yeah. And that's the way with any profession. You know, this — read this.

SB: The —

GW: Yeah, give it to me. [Sarah hands GW plaque from his desk.] Let me read it to you. This is what I live by. "If a man is called to be a street-sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare

wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street-sweeper who did his job well.'" That was Martin Luther King, Jr. Doesn't matter what you do. Just do it well. I remember – excuse me. [Phone ringing] Wright Funeral Home. [Pause in recording.] I remember I was a boy, I guess I was eight, nine years old, we lived out in the country. And they had chain gangs back in those days, you know. They come down the roads cleaning out the ditches, with the striped clothes, uniform, on. And they went by, and my daddy called me out to the road one day. He said, "Come on son, I want to show you something." And I went out there, and he said, "Look how pretty that ditch is." And I mean, it was a beautiful ditch. I mean, perpendicular sides, flat bottom, I mean, they made a beautiful ditch. He said, "Even if you dig a ditch, a man ride down this road ought to say, "Gosh, I'd like to have a ditch like that!" Huh? Just digging a ditch, there's a perfect way to do it. And he said, "A man should ride down this road and say, 'I'd love to have a ditch just like that.'" So that just taught me something, that regardless of what you do in life, wherever you plant your feet, you know, you ought to leave a footprint.

SB: That's especially vivid thinking about a chain gang doing that work, because they don't want to be in this situation.

GW: No. But they did their job well. They did their job well. Yep, and that's what we all should do. That's why a lot of the auto-makers, I think, they let the foreign auto-makers kind of take over our field, because we weren't doing the job well. They did it better. We got to get back to being the best.

SB: What did your father do?

GW: My father was a small-time farmer, part-time bootlegger. Just a jack of all trades struggling to make a living.

SB: Was there a main crop?

GW: Tobacco and corn liquor. [Laughs]

SB: I've heard there's been quite a lot of bootlegging around here, between here and the state line.

GW: Yeah, this section. And there's still some going on.

SB: Really?

GW: Yeah, still some going on.

SB: Interesting. And was he good at that?

GW: Hmm, he was small-time. Just enough to make a living. He was small-time. Well, in fact, he used to sell red liquor too, because this used to be a dry county, no liquor at all. And he would buy liquor over in Vance County and bring it here. Deputy sheriffs, solicitors, lawyers, would come out and buy liquor from him! [Laughs] So it was a close-knit community. [Laugh]

SB: And did you watch any of that process, coming up?

GW: What?

SB: Of the making the liquor.

GW: Oh, no, I didn't ever see any of it made. I used to pour the half-a-gallons into pint jars so Daddy'd sell it by the pint, so I assisted, yeah. It was interesting.

SB: I'm suddenly thinking of the parallel between sort of the chemistry that you need to know to do that, and in your profession.

GW: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I wasn't in on the making. Although I think my dad did, because he'd be gone some nights with the mule and wagon. I know he wasn't on the highway with the mule and wagon, they were going down in the bushes. [Laughs]

SB: And what about your mother?

GW: She was just a housewife. A housewife.

SB: What was she like?

GW: Ah, nice lady. Nice lady. [Sighs] I don't know, we didn't get along too well. I was a daddy's kid. Me and my dad, he was my hero.

[0:10:00] And we got along better than me and my mom. I think she didn't get along with me too well because I was so much like my dad. [Laughs] She'd say, "You're just like your dad!" [Laughs] Oh, and I wanted to say, "Thank you, Mom, thank you, thank you. That's my hero."

SB: Is either of them still living?

GW: No, no, Dad died in— whoo— '68. In '68. He died at the age of 58, I think.

SB: Oh wow, young.

GW: A young man, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Not so young for those days, but it was young. Now it's – whew, I was thirty-something when he died. I thought, "Wow, 58, I ain't got long!" You know. So I pushed as much living into my years as I could. [Laughs] Then find out that here I am, 76. Unbelievable. Unbelievable.

SB: Then you were born in – 1940?

GW: 'Forty. 1940. Yeah.

SB: I hope you don't mind my asking this, but when your parents passed, who took care of their arrangements and their bodies?

GW: I did. I – well, I took care of my dad, because I just thought Dad deserved the best, and I was the best I knew. It was tough, but he deserved the best. That's what he sent me to school for, to be good at what I do. I owed it to him. Yeah. Yeah.

SB: I can't imagine what that would be like.

GW: Oh. Oh, it was heartbreaking. But [clears throat] I've always been able to compartmentalize things. "I've got to get into my mortician, my funeral director mode. This is what I've got to do. This is what I've been trained to do. This is what he paid for my schooling for. If I can't give it to my dad, I'm falling down somewhere. I've got to get it." And I had a wife to die when she was 21, and I had to help her. I assisted in her preparation. Tough. Tough. Mmh.

SB: I can't imagine.

GW: Yeah.

SB: It's beyond my capacity to imagine.

GW: Yeah, I've been dragged through it mentally, now. All of my lifetime. It's made me the mental wreck that I am now. [Laughs]

SB: It must take amazing strength, I would think.

GW: Oh, you've got to live with a sense of humor. You've got to. And I've got a good sense of humor, so it gets me over the rough spots.

SB: Before the tape was running, you were talking about your feelings about death in general. Can you return to that a bit?

GW: Ah, well. I don't like death. I don't like funeral service. I do like the intermingling with people, the one-on-one that I have with families, and what I can do to make their transition over this period, if I can help them. And I do. That gives me joy, to know that once they go back after services they can say, "Mom had a beautiful home-going. She looked so beautiful I couldn't even cry." And you'd be surprised how many times I hear that. "Oh, Dad looked so handsome. Thank you, George, thank you. Thank you." Because the cancer and different illness can just ravage a body. Death by starvation. You know, you can't eat nothing. Just skin and bones. And you get molded back, take a picture and mold it back to a resemblance of Dad, oh, it's priceless. It's priceless. It's priceless. But in a small community you know everybody, you know? Very few people you don't know. If you don't know them, you know the person that called you. You know, so.

SB: You were talking about— was his name Larry?

GW: Oh, Larry McElroy, Rev. Larry McElroy. Yeah. Pastor, died about four weeks ago, and when I got the call that morning it was such a shock, and I hadn't even heard of his illness. I had a moment to reflect that, "Boy, I sure hate my friend died."

[0:15:00] But then I had to get back into the funeral director mode, "I've got a family that I've got to take care of. This family needs me." So I had to get to be funeral director. I had to forget that he was a friend of mine. And four or five days later, after services, I come home and sit down, I'm going to watch the Trump saga [laughs]— you know, see what's happening in that episode— and I said, "Darn, I just lost my friend Larry. Next time I go to Pine Grove Baptist Church, Larry's not going to be there. Boy, I didn't even know he was sick. Man. Sure going to miss him." Phone rings, another family needs me. No more pity for myself. You know. No more about my loss. Got to handle the family, got to get back in the funeral director mode. And off to another service. And that's the way it is. You know, no time for yourself. You know I've had one vacation in the last 35 years. You know, I get a day here, day there, but in a small town, just me and my wife run the business, and they expect me to be here. They expect me to do the work. They don't want nobody else to touch him, they just want George. And I've got to be here. My wife said, "Well, when are we going to retire?" I said, "Darling, you're going to have to pull me out the cemetery to bury me. I'm going to drop dead at the cemetery." [Laughs] They depend on me! I've got to be here! I've wanted it, I've made myself good enough for folks to care how things are done. It makes a difference if you call Wright Funeral Home, and now that I've built that reputation I've got to back it up, and only way I can back it up, I've got to be here. Got to be here. No vacations.

SB: Can you—I'm sorry, go ahead.

GW: No, it doesn't make sense. You shouldn't do that. But those folks depend on me. They want mother looking as best as she can look, and they know nobody does it better.

I've been fortunate, God gave me a gift. It is a gift. Yeah. It's amazing. I amaze myself. Sometime I go home and shake my wife, and say, "Baby, you won't believe." Gosh. I've learned something else, I've taught myself something, had a problem that was not coming out right, I've found how to do it better. You know. Stay here all night. Work it out.

SB: Do you consider it more a science, more an art, a combination?

GW: Ah, it's more an art. The science is solid. Formaldehyde preserves. But the art of putting it together. The science doesn't change. That will work on virtually any corpse. The science will work on basically any corpse. Formaldehyde preserves. But the art of putting it together, the art of making it look natural, the art of the presentation, what Mother's going to look like, the cosmetizing and making sure it's just right, it doesn't look like she's cosmetized. And I'll have families come in all the time, "Now, Mama didn't wear makeup. Mama didn't do this and didn't—" I'll say, "Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am." Hell, I'm going to do it my way, you ain't going to tell me how to do my work. I know what you want, you want Mama to look natural. You know. But they may go somewhere else, and they see her all painted up, and, aw, caked-on this, and — ahh. I've gone to other services, and "Oh, my goodness, if I could just get them for five — give me thirty minutes, I could help this family. They shouldn't have to see Mother looking like this." Or, "They shouldn't see Dad —" I'm just, "Thirty minutes, I could help." But it isn't my job, they didn't call me! But it's amazing, it's unbelievable, what you can do. It's unbelievable. I just surprise myself. Wow. I just step back and say, "Boy, did you do that? Mm. Isn't it amazing?" But then you sit on pins and needles hoping that your family will appreciate it, because it's not right until they say it's right. I don't care how much I like it, you know. I know where it's come from, from start to finish, there's been a transformation. But it's not good until they say it's good.

[0:20:00] And fortunately, they say it's good.

SB: It's almost like a form of portraiture, it sounds like.

GW: Yes. It is. It is.

SB: Having to wait for the approval of the people —

GW: Got to wait for the approval of the people. Right. Yeah.

SB: Are you artistic in other fields?

GW: Oh, I like to doodle, and draw. You know. I do a little drawing. Nothing — But it's eye-hand coordination. Eye-hand coordination, and hope your brain is telling your hand and your eyes to meet in the center. [Laughs] Yeah.

SB: Can you tell me a bit about the beginning of your business?

GW: Well, I was in business with my aunt and uncle, and they were old-school, in a little four-room house, and didn't want to come out of it. And after I came out of school, I said, "Look, we've got to do something. We've got to get into the new century, now. This is a four-room house, give good service, but the accommodations are poor." And they weren't interested, so I ended up having to go in business for myself. And they didn't want to pay, you know. I think I served my apprenticeship, I was paid 15 dollars a week.

SB: Wow.

GW: "Wow," you're right. [Laughs] I had a wife and two kids! My father supplemented my income so I could serve an apprenticeship.

SB: It sounds like he was really supportive of your career.

GW: Oh, yeah. I was his hero too. Yeah. Yeah. I was his hero. Yeah. He supported me 1,000 percent. I tried not to let him down [coughs], although he told me I was the biggest fool he'd ever seen. [Laughs] He said, "Son, you just love to spend money too much! You just love to spend money. You've got to learn there's as much fun in saving it as in spending it!" He said, "You the only person I've ever met in my life that'll ride cross a bridge and go back and try to buy the damn thing." [Laughs] He said, "You'll ride across a bridge— 'Mm! I like the way that bridge ride!' — and you'll go back and try to buy it!" [Laughing] Holy cow. Hoo, and then I'll buy the bridge, and, boy, it's bumpy, "It don't ride like I thought it rode!" Dad was right. I shouldn't have bought the bridge. [Laughing] But that's after I bought the bridge. I think about him quite often, and I think, "Pop, you were right again." After all this time, I can remember that he told me better, and I wouldn't listen. I had to do it my way. Which ain't been bad, but I've caused myself some problems. Enjoyed most of them, but they were problems. [Laughing] Yeah. Yeah, it's been quite a career.

SB: How has the work that you do changed over the years? Techniques, attitudes—

GW: [Clears throat] Well, it's basically the same as when I started, far as technique, other than my wanting to do it better. You I know, I see folks doing it the same way as I did 40 years ago. I do it different than I did a couple of months ago, because I keep trying to improve. Different technique, different way of applying cosmetics or different way of tissue-building and molding and— And I've changed. Wow, I've changed 1,000 percent. Folks that [clears throat], folks that taught me in school, I could teach them now. I could really give them a lesson in it, because what they were teaching was good at the time, but boy, did I improve on technique. I find that death doesn't affect the

public as much as it used to. You know. It used to be really taboo, but now it's so much death, so much killing, it's everyday routine. Death, you know, is just different. Folks don't have any respect, the kids are killing each other. The world has just really changed. Changing dynamic. Really changing. It's sad. It is sad. [Coughs]

[0:25:00] So the public's thinking of death has changed. We used to didn't have any cremations in the black neighborhood. Now it's becoming more and more prevalent.

SB: What is the thinking behind a family's choice that might have changed over the generations, between cremation and burial?

GW: Well [clears throat], in our neighborhood it's been finances. It's less expensive to cremate than it is to have a regular funeral. And that's the big difference in the black community, is finances. They've found out that, well, they just don't have as much money. The affluent people, they'd rather have a regular burial, earth-burial, but if they're poor, you know, they have little choice. But we've been fortunate that the quality of service that we give gives us a good clientele, of people who like earth burials and want it done right. So that gives us a good clientele, where we may not be number one in volume – we're number one in service. And the quality of the service is good. Right.

SB: What is a typical week like, say, in terms of the number of people who will come to you, what your daily work is like?

GW: Ah, we only bury between 80 and 100 a year. So it may be [coughs] one every week and a half, something like that, sometimes two a week. But it's nobody but my wife and I. We have kept our overhead low so we can keep our prices down. So we do it all. You know. We have a fellow to wash the cars, but other than that, my wife and I do everything. We do it all.

SB: You pick up the people –

GW: Well, I do have, for the last five years, I've had a gentleman who would transport for me. That took a lot of weight off me, at my age. That really helps. But other than that, the embalming, the dressing, everything, paperwork, we do it all. No secretary. My wife and I do all the paperwork. Plus she babysits three days a week. We have a four-year-old grandson, and on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays, she babysits. So that takes her out of the office. And boy do I miss her. I hate to tell her how much. [Laughs] Boy, I miss her when she's gone. I've got to answer the phone, I carry my phone with me all the time, I'm never off. I go to lunch, I've got to have the phone on my hip. So 24 hours a day. Twenty-four-seven. I sleep with the phone by my pillow. And there are answering service you can get, but I like the personal touch I can give. I'm here. "George, this is –" "I'm here, baby. What can I do for you?"

SB: I would imagine you and your family are sacrificing a great deal, in this field, to serve.

GW: We do, but we get a lot out of this field. We've got a profitable business. We've got a profitable business. The quality of our service, quality people who've got finances, will pay for what we deliver. And so it has its — we do sacrifice a lot, but — In fact, on Father's Day, we just had Father's Day, and they wanted to know where I wanted to go. I said, "I don't want to go anywhere, I want to stay at home. I want a day at home." And I said, "I'm going to throw some ribs on the grill" — I love to barbeque — "I'm going to throw some ribs on the grill, and I'm just going to set here and watch them stew." You know, barbeque some ribs. Eight o'clock that morning, death call. I've got to get back into funeral director mode. Here I go. So it tied up my Father's Day. But I miss — well, I still cooked the ribs, it was just that I missed the enjoyment of not having to work. But that family just lost their daddy, you know, what kind of Father's Day are they having? Daddy just died on Father's Day.

[0:30:00] You know, you think about it like that, "Hey, I got it made." I just can't be there every minute with the ribs. I can run back and check them. But now, here they lost their dad on Father's Day. Hey, it's a profession. You see how you can be drawn from one string to the other? But if you think about it, hey, they lost their dad. How am I to complain because I can't sit there and watch them ribs burn? [Laughs]

SB: Do you live close to the funeral home?

GW: Next door. Next door. Yeah.

SB: What are some of the kinds of particularly difficult cases you've worked with, both technically, I would say, and, you know, emotionally? When is it especially hard for you?

GW: Well, kids, like my wife was saying earlier. Kids. Specially if it's a violent death. They haven't had a chance at life. Didn't know what life's all about. That's difficult. Future lost. Won't be able to provide for society to society. Automobile accidents, gunshot wounds to the head. Things like that. And a lot of times, most times, we can put it back together. Most times. That's difficult. I used to find it a challenge, and ready to dive into it. Now at my age, I, "Oh my god, not again. Not again. But here I go, I got to do it." Yeah. When I was young, I was wondering if I could do it — I've got to try it, I've got to make it work out for the family. Now that I know I can do it, oh my god, I hate to have to do it again. So your thinking changes on it. So like I say, I don't like funeral business. It's hard to like death. And the sad part of it, you know they bury funeral directors too? [Laughs] Doggone! One day my number going to come up! Yep. And I just hope somebody treats my family as well as I try to treat the families I serve.

SB: After so many years in the community, helping people, I would imagine—

GW: Yeah. Yeah. I've been fortunate. I've been fortunate.

SB: How do people in your field get past the sort of natural aversion that we're born with, the aversion to dead bodies? I mean, so many people, your first thought is either fright or, you know, disgust of some sort.

GW: Well, familiarity. You know, once you get familiar with it, it helps. But I'm fortunate that death still bothers me. You know. I've had some funeral directors say, "Oh, I love embalming." As good as I am at it, I don't like it. I don't like death. That's why I play the lottery. [Laughs] If I ever hit, you know, I said I'd quit if I hit the lottery — but I don't know, folks depend on me. That's why I haven't taken vacations. Folks depend on me. I want to be here for them. I don't know if I'd quit or not, I really don't. Yeah.

SB: What do you wish more people understood about your profession?

GW: It's not as easy as it looks. You know, when they come in here and they know what Dad looked like lying in the bed for two years, and starving for the last six months, and then when they come in here and he looks so natural, they just think you just pop your fingers and that happens. They just don't know the hours I stood over Dad, hoping to bring some familiarity back to his corpse. They just don't know the work that goes into it. It's just that it looks so nice, it looks so easy. "Gosh, he looks alive." They go, "That won't hard."

[0:35:00] [Laughing] They just don't know. Oh my goodness.

SB: I've never been present for the embalming or otherwise preparation of the body. Can you sort of walk me through—

GW: Oh, it's basically, embalming is basically the replacing of the blood with preservative. You raise an artery and the vein, and you inject an artery and drain out the vein, and that's basically embalming. Simple. But then you can run into all blood clots, and this and that, edema, fluids. It's so much, I don't know what I'm doing. You know. I've got to get in—each case is different. I don't know what the next case is going to be. But basically it's the replacing the blood with the preservative. But then the artistic part come in, and that's what separates the men from the boys. That's what separate us. Your caring, wanting to do. I don't know who, any of my fellow funeral directors, that might spend as much time in the prep room on a service as I do. You know, it's nothing for me to be in there for four hours. "What you do in there for that long?" "Getting it right!" "Well, let me see you do one." I said, "One wouldn't tell you

anything. You've got to do thousands." "Let me see you do one, George." "Aw, no! No you won't." [Laughs] Eat your hearts out. [Laughs] Yes indeed. "We heard you were good." "Yeah, well, keep listening."

SB: Is there a lot of—in addition to the embalming, the artistic side, is there a lot of reconstruction work?

GW: Yeah, that's what I'm saying, the reconstruction. Yeah.

SB: What sort of work is that, is that—

GW: Well, you've got to get the features right. You've got to make sure the mouth is posed right. There's a lot of emaciation. You've got to fill in the features with special fluid. And it's, the restoration is, that's it. That's it. That means everything. The final preservative and all that, the clothes on, you don't even see it, but you see that face. They're going to see Mama. And Mama needs to look like Mama, and Mama needs to look pleasant. I was standing out here one day, and we had a gentleman who the community has always called ugly. [Laughs] They'd say, "That is one ugly man." [Laughing] And we were standing out there, me and a couple of the family members. This little old lady came in, she went over there and looked at him, looked at him. We were just standing there talking, you know, won't paying her no mind. And she came and walked on by, she said, "Brother Wright, I tell you something. You're the only man I know that can take a monkey and make him look like folks." [Laughs] Oh my god! I said, "Yes, ma'am." I'm standing there with the family! [Laughing] "You're the only man I know that can take a monkey and make him look like folks." Oh my god! Did you ever!

SB: Maybe not the way you'd have chosen to have it phrased!

GW: So it has its moments, man. Oh, wow. But it was quite an accomplishment. She was right. I took a monkey and made him look like folks. [Laughing] Oh man.

SB: What are some of the other kinds of things that happen that you're able to find humor in?

GW: I don't know, there's thousands of them, I guess. But it's also routine. I don't know. I know there's a lot of things that have crossed me, but when you're asked then you don't remember.

SB: Sure, yeah.

GW: I'm trying to think, but it just doesn't come to mind right now. As we talk it'll jump up.

SB: What about when — it's a similar question — but what about particular people who you've served who have stayed with you, in your memory? Cases that you've worked with?

[0:40:00] GW: Very few.

SB: Yeah?

GW: I'm able to go on. That's why I can put up with this business. That's why I can take it another day, because I don't keep it in mind. Even the worst cases, I can catalog them back; I can think of some that, ooh, decapitations, when you put it back. But you don't think. I've got to get rid of it. If I drag it with me it'll weigh me down. You know, it'll weigh me down. I can't carry it forward. It's death. It's horrible. It's unpleasant. Yeah. So I don't remember. My wife asks me, "George, So-and-So—" "I don't remember, baby." "So-and-So—" "I don't remember." "You don't ever remember anything!" Thank you, Jesus, that I don't. Don't carry it on. Live it for the day. Get it done, try and pass it on, pass it back—"Next." And that helps me. Because if I carried it with me, oh my goodness. So much sadness over the years, my goodness. Mm. One case, fellow was stabbed 97 times—now that you mention it. Ninety-seven times. He had 18 inches of slashes in his face. I measured them. Eighteen inches of slashes, 97—stabbed him all on the bottom of his feet. The mama asked me, she said, "George, they hurt my baby bad?" I said, "Naw sugar, it going to be all right. It won't that much. Won't that much." And when she came in to see him, there was nothing to see but her son. No 18 inches of slash wounds in his face. All taken care of. All taken care of. Two years later, they made a mistake and let her go to the trial, and they showed the damn pictures of his body, and his face and everything. She ended up in the insane asylum. She couldn't take it. And I had done my job so well. So well. I said, "See, baby, I told you, it wasn't nothing but a scratch. Won't nothing." And she got over it. "Okay, thank you, George, thank you." And two years later they gone take her to the trial and see this fellow get his due; didn't realize that they were going to show all those pictures. And they showed all the autopsy pictures, and the crime-scene pictures and all that. The woman went insane. Went insane. I felt so sorry for her. "And George told me wasn't nothing wrong with my son. Lookathere." Mm! Mm. Boy, that was amazing. See, these little things pop up in your mind. You don't think—.

SB: When you work with somebody like that, somebody who's died violently, how does it affect your feelings about human nature?

GW: Aw, human nature. Aw, we're crazy folks. You know, the human being is something. Animals are so much better. You know, they're so much better. [Laughs] Yeah, animals are so much better. They only kill to survive. You know, they only kill for food. The normal chain of life. But humans will do it for anything. Sometimes they do it

for nothing. So humans – mm. I don't have much faith in human beings. Like my son once told me, you know, he said somebody was talking about they were in love. He said, "Dad, I told him, I said, if you want something to love, get you a dog. You know, you fall in love with a dog, you're going to get your return on it!" Man, fall in love with anybody else, it's a chance you take. [Laughs] So I remembered that. You want to fall in love, get you a dog.

SB: It's like what they say about living in Washington, if you want a friend, get a dog.

GW: Get you a dog! Yeah! Yeah. [Laughs] That makes sense, yeah.

[0:45:00]

SB: May I ask about how your own spiritual beliefs affect your work? Does that come into it or is that compartmentalized?

GW: That's compartmentalized. It doesn't, not really. No, it doesn't. Nope. It doesn't come into it at all.

SB: Okay.

GW: Other than, "Do the right thing." You know. The way you live every day like that, want to do the right thing; and you don't always succeed, but you know you ought to. "Do the right thing." Every day you go to bed, you ought to say, "Well, I did the right thing. I don't have to stay here and twist and suffer that I've done something wrong." And if you've done something wrong you ought to smile about it. [Laughs] You ought to say, "Aw, yeah!" [Laughs]

SB: Be glad that you done it!

GW: Be glad you did. "I'd like to do that again." [Laughs]

SB: What sort of diversity of faith and populations do you encounter? Is it fairly –

GW: We're fairly – this is a Baptist community, and our clientele is 99 percent Baptist.

SB: Primarily African American?

GW: Primarily African American. A few Caucasians. Very few. But mostly African Americans, yeah. I used to be on the city council, and one of the commissioners asked me, said, "George, do you bury white folks?" I said, "Just as damn deep as I can!" [Laughs] That settled that. Got that cleared up.

SB: I had not realized when I first started this project quite how divided it still was between white and African American. I wonder also, how do, say, Hispanic and American Indian families fit in? Do they most often go to one funeral home and not another?

GW: Usually they go to one funeral home and not another. Most Mexicans in this area will go to a white funeral home, because their boss is – they'll be working for a white plantation owner or something, and he'll direct them there. So that's how that goes. So we are 99% African American, Afro-American.

SB: What about the Indian tribes in the area?

GW: We don't have that much. Not in Oxford, no. Around Lumberton, and over in Warren County, over that way, but here we don't.

SB: Do you happen to know if over in Warren County there are any Indian-owned funeral homes?

GW: I don't think so. I don't think so.

SB: Thinking about those folks, you know, down around the Halifax line.

GW: Yeah, down that way. Yeah. I don't know if there's any Indian-owned funeral homes or not. I don't think so.

SB: How have the services themselves, the funeral services, changed through your career?

GW: Well, when I first came out of embalming school, when we would have a church service – and all services were at church then, because we only had these little four-room houses, and they couldn't accommodate the funeral crowds – we would always view at the end of the service, and this is the last time they were going to see Mama, and all hell would break loose. I mean, the mourning and the crying and the shouting and the falling-out.

[0:50:00] I told my uncle, I said, "We aren't going to do it that way. We're going to change. We're going to start viewing before, when they first come in the church. We're going to do the viewing, and we're going to close the casket, and we're not going to open it anymore." "That ain't going to work." "It'll work." What you've got to do is get your family right before you go to church. So what I do is I tell my family, I say, "Now, you notice how at the end, after the preacher has preached the sermon, after he's given you words of wisdom, and then you open the casket and everything goes to hell?" I say,

“We aren’t going to do that anymore.” I say, “You’re going to leave that church with the minister’s message in your mind. You’re going to leave the church with the minister’s message in your mind, and the way we’re going to do that, we’re going to view going in. We’ll take Mama to church an hour early, okay? And she’ll lie in state, people can come, can view her. And when we get there, she’ll still be open. We’ll parade in, we’ll march in, we’ll have our seats. Once everybody is complete, we’ll close the casket, not open it anymore.” It’s tradition now. That’s tradition now. That’s changed. And that part of the service has changed. And the preachers aren’t preaching as long as they used to. You know, they used to preach an hour. Now the average sermon is 15 minutes, about 15 minutes now. So it’s changing, customs are changing.

SB: What about music?

GW: Oh, the still, there’s still the Negro spirituals are sung, mostly. Beautiful music. Beautiful music. Yeah.

SB: Are there singers, quartets in this area?

GW: Well, quartets are about gone, they’re about gone now. Very few quartets. It used to be there was a quartet in every family. That was the way we entertained ourselves. We’d get together on Saturday night and we would sing. They’d get the best voices, and they’d form a quartet. Yeah. But now it’s very few quartets. So mostly it’s church choirs and soloists. Church choirs and soloists. In fact, I’ve got a young man that comes by and washes cars for me who is great. I mean, he should have been a professional. You know, never had the opportunity, and didn’t have the motherwit to handle it. But talent-wise, wow! Musically inclined? I guess he’s about 60—I guess he’s 64 or 65 now. Decided last year he wanted to play the bass guitar. Taught his self how to play that darn thing in six months. Can you believe it?

SB: That’s amazing.

GW: Huh? Taught himself to play the bass guitar. I bought him some tapes and stuff, lessons. I said, “I’ll get you some tapes, here.” He said, “Man, that stuff ain’t nothing. I can do it better by ear.” Taught himself how to play a bass guitar in six months! Plays better than some of the groups he used to sing with. Amazing.

SB: What kind of music does he play and sing?

GW: Anything. I used to run a nightclub years ago, and he could do James Brown, Otis Redding, Sam Cooke—you name it and he’d tear the house all to pieces! He was just a talented fellow! You know, and never made any money at it, you know? I always tell folks, “James Brown won’t be the only James Brown.” You know, Michael Jackson won’t be the only Michael Jackson, he just got exposure. There’s a lot of talent that never

gets to Broadway. Yeah. And I've seen it. I saw it. I lived with it. He's a friend of mine. He's amazing.

SB: What's his name?

GW: [Name redacted] Yeah, they call him Little Willie Banks. Little Willie Banks was a famous gospel singer and they called him Little Willie Banks. In fact, he was on the program with Willie Banks once, and Banks told him, "Man, I ain't never being on the program with you no more. You sound more like me than I do." [Laughs] He could imitate just about anyone when it came to music. And didn't need music; he'd just take his fingers, pop his fingers. I don't know how in the world he'd pop his fingers like that, but he'd just have his fingers popping. What a talent. Hmm.

[0:55:00]

SB: I'd love to know more about the nightclub that you ran. When was that?

GW: That was the Golden Wheel. That was back in '67. Wasn't making any money in the funeral service, and my family owned a little acre of land out in the country, and one day after Christmas, I think I had \$300 left after Christmas, I said, "I'm going to build me a nightclub!" [Laughs] Three hundred dollars! And believe it or not, I did it. I went out there and marked it off, I said, "Yeah, I can get a nice building here for a nightclub." So I went one of the wholesalers, one of the suppliers; and my dad had a good reputation. My dad had a reputation. He paid his bills. I said, "Well, now I'm going to use my dad's reputation." So I went, I figured up everything I was going to need, and I ordered it all because I knew that if I fell short I wouldn't be able to get no more! So I ordered everything I needed, and in three months I had it up and running. And boy, you never made so much money. Wow, was it coming in. But it was back in the day when they didn't have places for folks to go. Saturday-night fish-fry, you know. And it was a little rough. I had to do my own bouncing for the first six months. But then after they found out how well I bounced [laughs], they calmed down. Said, "Man, don't go out there messing around," because I didn't mess around. "Don't go out there messing. Don't do that. They don't play that at the Golden Wheel, now." In fact, I had to shoot one fellow.

SB: Wow.

GW: He was out there going to break in, and won't going to pay. I went out there, and he went in his pocket—and I had practiced my draw. [Laughs] I grew up with Gene Autry and Roy Rogers and all them boys! So I was good friend with them. [Laughs] So I ended up shooting him. Didn't kill him; I shot him. And about three weeks later, they came to me, said, "George, that fellow you shot's up there, up there at the door. Want to see you." Said, "Don't go." Said, "You go out the back." I said "No, hell, I'm going over

there to see him. See what he wants." So I went up there, he said, "Mr. Wright, can I speak to you for a minute?" "Sure, come in the office." He got there, said, "Mr. Wright, I'm sorry I made you shoot me." He said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I made you shoot me." Said, "Can I come back in?" I said, "You know how to act?" He said, "Oh, yeah! I know how to act! Yes sir, I know how to act." I said, "All right, I'm going to let you in, and I'm going to give you one cold beer. And I don't want you in here begging my paying clients for beer." He said, "Mr. Wright, I sure appreciate it. I won't never forget it." And he didn't. He came back in, quiet. In fact, several weeks later he came up to me said, "Fellow right there was trying to start something in the corner, and I told him, 'We don't have that out here. Y'all cut that out.'" [Laughs]

SB: He became the junior bouncer.

GW: Yeah. He said, "No, we don't have that out here. You stop that mess." And they just weren't used to it. You know. How you act at a Saturday-night French-fry [sic], everything break-a loose. And this way we've got to construct ourselves. We've got to do it right. In fact, the sheriff used to tell me, "George, we don't know what we'd do if it weren't for the Golden Wheel." He said, "Saturday night, we know where people are. They aren't in the street bothering us. Know you out there and you're taking good care of them. We appreciate you being here." See, so, everything has its good side. Yeah. It was a good thing for the community. They had somewhere after working all week, making nothing, they could come – and I had live entertainment. Bands.

SB: What was that like?

GW: And for two dollars. Come in for two dollars. Live entertainment. Unbelievable. Two bucks!

SB: What sort of music?

GW: Bands! Johnny White and the Crusaders. The Shamrocks. Different local groups, from Durham, Raleigh. I'd get them all coming in.

[1:00:00] Oh, it was amazing. Yeah. It was amazing. Beautiful music too. Oh, they would right hate to go home some nights, it was so much fun. Oh!

SB: Did any of the bands from the Kinston area ever play here? People like the – gosh, who-all would that be. The Night Owls, and the Mighty Men.

GW: Look like I had a band from Kinston. Look like I had one band from Kinston area, I can't remember. But we had Tyrone Davis, Wild Man Steve – he was a comedian – ah, dang. Ben E. King. Not B.B. King but Ben. E. King.

SB: He was from Henderson, right?

GW: He was from Henderson. And Gerald Austin. Right. Gerald Austin. Gerald Austin and the Mannhattans. Gerald Austin was from Henderson.

SB: I didn't know that.

GW: Yeah. So every now and then I could bring in a good star. I'd catch them when they'd have a show in Durham, and then maybe that Sunday night I could have them at a reduced rate where we could afford them. And it was an interesting saga, an interesting saga. It was fun. But after about five years, it got on my nerves. I couldn't handle it. And I was doing my own bouncing. Because everybody can't bounce. They think you just beat people up and throw them out. You know, you don't back people in the corner. "What we want to do is have a good time. Now, let's talk about it." You know. "I'm sorry you're having a problem, but let's see if we can't straighten it out. Then if we can't straighten it out, we'll carry you out." [Laughs] My dad told me once, one time he helped me on the door, he said, "Man, you're going to kill somebody. You don't know how hard you be hitting folks." You got to stop them! Once you go, you can't half-step. You've got to stop them. [Laughs] Yeah, so he was afraid I was going to kill somebody. So there you go.

SB: Well, I've taken an hour of your morning, but this has been really fascinating, really helpful. I sure appreciate it.

GW: Well, happy that you've come, and happy, good to talk with you.

SB: Is there anything that you'd like to cover that we haven't talked about?

GW: No, I didn't care about covering this! [Laughs]

SB: Okay! [Laughs]

GW: You asked. [Laughs] I was just accommodating you.

SB: Well I sure appreciate it!

GW: I'm happy to have you. [Laughing]

SB: Okay, well, I will stop the recording, but it's been a great interview. Thank you.

GW: Oh, you're more than welcome, darling.

[1:03:01: End of recording]